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What Went Wrong in the Bay of Pigs Landings

When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, he found on his desk in the White House an Eisenhower Administration policy paper, known as the "Castro-must-go" paper, which ruled that the Communist infection in Cuba must be eliminated and gave a detailed plan for doing it.

The document called for an invasion of Cuba by Cuban exiles with United States air cover and logistic support. In fact the invasion had actually been scheduled to take place in November 1960 but was called off by President Eisenhower when President-elect Kennedy declined to associate himself with the action.

The new President faced a grave choice. To call off the invasion scheme might have demoralized the anti-Castro exiles and opened the new Administration to charges of appeasement. Mr. Kennedy himself, in his television debates with Mr. Nixon during the campaign, had advocated open aid to the non-Batista and anti-Castro rebels and complained that the Eisenhower Administration was not doing enough about Castro.

On the other hand, to back the exiles with massive United States air and naval forces would be widely regarded as old-fashioned Yankee Imperialism. It would provoke resentment in Latin America, where, as Adlai Stevenson stated in the report on his South American 10-nation tour, the "principle of nonintervention is a religion." It might even provoke Soviet Russia to intervene and perhaps touch off World War III.

Advisers Divided

A spirited debate took place within the Administration on what course to adopt between these two extremes. . . . President Kennedy had, from the beginning, strong doubts about the operation and was opposed to the direct participation of American armed forces in the venture. His military and civilian advisers were divided. While the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon favored the plan devised during the Eisenhower Administration, the State Department and some key aides in the White House doubted the wisdom of an American-backed invasion.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk was aware that the contemplated invasion would violate every "nonintervention" provision of the Charter of Bogota. He pointed out that direct intervention or overt aid might mean that the United States would be accused of violating the United Nations Charter and Organization of American States treaties. Chester Bowles disliked the whole idea.

Despite his doubts, the President was persuaded to go ahead with the invasion plan. The information supplied by the CIA, backed up by naval intelligence, helped him make the final decision. Richard Bissell, CIA deputy director in charge of the Cuban operation, decided that it was "now or never." The Castro government was getting stronger every day

About the Author

This story of why the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba failed in April 1961 was written by Dr. Nicolas Rivero, a former Castro aide who fled from Cuba.



Dr. N. Rivero

Dr. Rivero was a Cuban delegate to the Organization of American States under Batista, but resigned in disgust and worked in support of the Castro revolution. He became head of the Department of Information of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations under Castro. But, disillusioned again, he escaped from Cuba and worked closely in Washington, D.C., with the anti-Castro Democratic Revolutionary Front.

His account is reprinted, by permission, from his book, *Castro's Cuba: An American Dilemma*, published in 1962 by Robert B. Luce, Inc., Washington, D.C.

for action. The President also was informed that the president of Guatemala was under heavy political pressure from left-wingers there to evict the Cuban exiles from their camps. The CIA insisted that Cuba was ripe for revolt against the Castro regime and that the Cuban Army of Liberation in Guatemala was at the peak of training and determination to fight.

On March 29, after making some changes in the plan, President Kennedy flashed the green light from the White House. One of the President's modifications banned United States air support of the invaders, which meant that if there was not a simultaneous mass uprising by the Cuban people the invasion was doomed to failure. The President also directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the invasion plans in the light of the ban on American air support.

Air Support Plan

The new plan called for air strikes on Castro's air bases to knock out his tiny air force. The air attacks were to be publicized as the work of defectors from the Castro air force but were actually to be carried out by B-26 bombers from Guatemalan bases, piloted by Cuban exiles. Jose Miro Cardona, head of the Revolutionary Council, was informed in New York about this plan by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Adolf A. Berle, Jr. but was not told that the President was substituting this plan for United States air support of the invaders.

light bombers. One plane attacked Castro's main air base at San Antonio, built by the United States during World War II. The other plan worked over Havana's Camp Liberty, Fidel's main military headquarters. A similar B-26 raid took place on the military airport at Santiago de Cuba, 500 miles away in Oriente Province.

U.N. Hears Charges

The air strike came at the time when the United Nations had before it a Cuban charge that the United States was waging "undeclared war" against the Castro government. In the United Nations, Raul Roa, Cuba's foreign minister, accused the United States of staging the air strike.

Mr. Stevenson, United States ambassador to the United Nations, denied categorically that the United States bombed the Cuban airfield and cited the Cuban markings on one of the planes that had landed at the Miami International Airport with its engine nicked by bullets. But that night Mr. Stevenson threatened to resign and demanded that there be no more air attacks. The President then called off the strike, which was to have taken place just before the landing.

It must be added that the cancellation of the second B-26 strike was only the last stage in the process of scaling down the Cuban invasion plan. Much earlier, even before President Kennedy's inauguration on Jan. 20, 1961, influential liberals tried to scuttle any plans for an invasion of Cuba. Shortly after the elections Sen. Mike Mansfield said that he hoped that President-elect Kennedy would be receptive "to every opportunity" for negotiations of United States-Cuban differences, and weeks later intelligence officers of the anti-Castro Cuban Democratic Revolutionary Front reported that Mr. Stevenson had been talking with Foreign Minister Raul Roa at the Chilean Delegation to the United Nations in New York.

Diplomatic Speculation

During the interregnum—before and after the Eisenhower Administration broke diplomatic relations with Cuba—it was a matter of speculation in diplomatic quarters whether there would be any change in the United States policy toward the Castro regime by the incoming Administration. It was known that there were many close to the President-elect who held the view that the new Administration should make some conciliatory gesture toward Castro as the Cuban revolutionary regime blamed the diplomatic break on the Eisenhower Administration. Argentine President Arturo Frondizi announced that any attempt by President-elect John F. Kennedy's incoming Administration and Premier Fidel Castro's regime to negotiate their differences would be looked on with favor by Latin America.

The new President quickly ruled out any rapprochement with the Castro regime. In his first news conference, on Jan. 25, 1961, he said that the United States was not considering resuming diplomatic relations with the Castro government.